

Q4

How is total ozone distributed over the globe?

The distribution of total ozone over Earth varies with location on timescales that range from daily to seasonal. The variations are caused by large-scale movements of stratospheric air and the chemical production and destruction of ozone. Total ozone is generally lowest at the equator and highest in polar regions.

Total ozone. Total ozone at any location on the globe is defined as the sum of all the ozone in the atmosphere directly above that location. Most ozone resides in the stratospheric ozone layer and a small percentage (about 10%) is distributed throughout the troposphere (see Q1). Total ozone values are often reported in *Dobson units* denoted as “DU.” Typical values vary between 200 and 500 DU over the globe (see Figure Q4-1). The ozone molecules required for total ozone to be 500 DU around the globe would form a layer of pure ozone gas at Earth’s surface having a thickness of only 5 millimeters (0.2 inches) (see Q1).

Global distribution. Total ozone varies strongly with latitude over the globe, with the largest values occurring at middle and high latitudes during all seasons (see Figure Q4-1). This is the result of the large-scale circulation of air in the stratosphere that slowly transports ozone from the tropics, where ozone production from solar ultraviolet radiation is highest, toward the poles. Ozone accumulates at middle and high latitudes, increasing the thickness (or vertical extent) of the ozone layer and, at the same time, total ozone. In contrast, the values of total ozone are the lowest in the tropics in all seasons (except for those within the Antarctic ozone hole) because the thickness of the ozone layer is smallest there.

Seasonal distribution. Total ozone also varies with season, as is shown in Figure Q4-1 using two-week averages of ozone taken from 2009 satellite observations. March and September plots represent the early spring and fall seasons in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. June and December plots similarly represent the early summer and winter seasons. Total ozone shows a maximum at high latitudes during spring as a result of increased transport of ozone from its source region in the tropics toward the polar regions during late fall and winter. This ozone transport is much weaker during the summer and early fall periods and is weaker overall in the Southern Hemisphere. An important feature of seasonal ozone changes is the natural chemical destruction that occurs when daylight is continuous in the summer polar stratosphere, which causes total ozone to decrease gradually toward its lowest values in early fall.

This natural seasonal cycle can be observed clearly in the Northern Hemisphere as shown in Figure Q4-1, with increasing values in Arctic total ozone during winter, a clear maximum in spring, and decreasing values from summer to fall. In the Antarctic, however, a pronounced minimum in total ozone is observed during spring. The minimum is a consequence of the “ozone hole,” which describes the widespread chemical destruction of ozone by ozone-depleting substances (see Q6 and Q11) in spring. In the late 1970s, before the ozone hole appeared each year, much higher ozone values were found in the Antarctic spring (see Q11). Now, the lowest values of total ozone across the globe and all seasons are found every late winter and spring in the Antarctic as shown in Figure Q4-1. After spring, these low values disappear from total ozone maps as polar air mixes with lower-latitude air containing much higher ozone values.

In the tropics, the total ozone changes through the progression of the seasons are much smaller than in the polar regions. This is because seasonal changes in both sunlight and ozone transport are smaller in the tropics than those in the polar regions.

Global Satellite Maps of Total Ozone in 2009

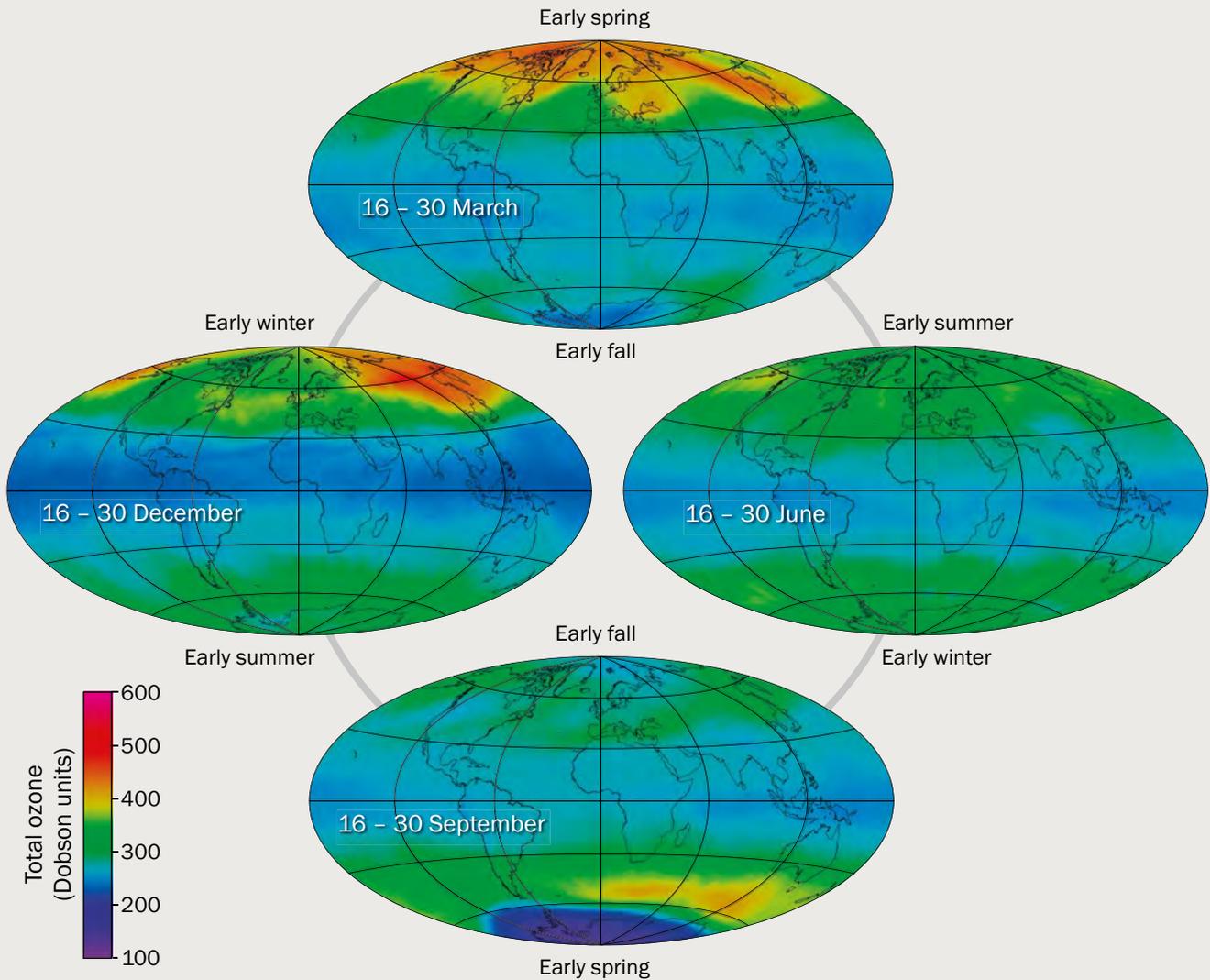


Figure Q4-1. Total ozone.

Total ozone at any location on the globe is defined as the sum of all the ozone molecules in the atmosphere directly above that location. Total ozone varies with latitude, longitude, and season, with the largest values at high latitudes and the lowest values in tropical regions. The variations are demonstrated here with two-week averages of total ozone in 2009 as measured with a satellite instrument. Total ozone shows little variation in the tropics (20°N–20°S latitudes) over all seasons. Total ozone outside the tropics varies more strongly with time on a daily to seasonal basis as ozone-rich air is moved from the tropics and accumulates at higher latitudes. The low total ozone values over Antarctica in September constitute the "ozone hole" in 2009. Since the 1980s, the ozone hole in late winter and early spring represents the lowest values of total ozone that occur over all seasons and latitudes (see Q11).

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Natural variations. Total ozone varies strongly with latitude and longitude as seen within the seasonal plots in Figure Q4-1. These patterns, which change on daily to weekly timescales, come about for two reasons. First, natural air motions mix and blend air between regions of the stratosphere that have high ozone values and those that have low ozone values. Tropospheric weather systems can temporarily change the thickness of the ozone layer in a region, and thereby change total ozone. The geographical variation in these air motions in turn causes variations in the distribution of total ozone.

Second, ozone variations occur as a result of changes in the balance of chemical production and loss processes as air moves to and from different locations over the globe. This balance, for example, is very sensitive to the amount of sunlight in a region.

There is a good understanding of how chemistry and air motions work together to cause the observed large-scale features in total ozone, such as those seen in Figure Q4-1. Ozone changes are routinely monitored by a large group of investigators using satellite, airborne, and ground-based instruments. The continued analysis of these observations provides an important basis to quantify the contribution of human activities to ozone depletion.